

A Theory of Knowledge*

A noite não anoitece pelos meus olhos. ... Fora de eu pensar e de haver quaisquer pensamentos, a noite anoitece concretamente. (Fernando Pessoa, O universo...)

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in any field of knowledge sooner or later have to face questions related to reality, knowledge, language, truth and foundation. These are, in fact, some of the basic concepts of Epistemology (the theory of knowledge). If that is so, we had better take some position in relation to them before embarking on a research project.

In this paper, I present some of the basic questions of Epistemology and try to come to some answers.

My central claim, all along this paper, is that what is real is real even without being known; what is known is known even without being justified; what is true is true even without being justified; what is justified is justified only with the best reasons at the moment; what is founded is founded only if it agrees with what is real.

1. REALITY

Reality is how all that exists actually is. It is not real what is only imaginary or possible (but the very *fact* of imagining is itself real). The expression comes from the late Scholastics, more precisely from Duns Scotus (ABBAGNANO, 2000). The Scholastics distinguished between “existence in the things” (*in re*, and thus *re-ality*) from “existence in mind”. I regard intellectual facts as part of the reality. I mean: a plan, a musical composition, a story not written yet, etc. are facts that take place in someone’s mind, in a given moment or for some time. It does

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not mean that *the objects* of the intellectual facts (the expected retirement, the music composed, the character created, etc.) are real. For example: a girl wants to see a unicorn. Her will is something real and we can judge if it exists or not. In this example, only the animal she wants to see is not real.

1.1. The existence of something real

The question here is about the actual existence of the real world, in other words, if something exists as a matter of fact. There should not be doubt about this, since I wrote this text and you are reading it. These mere facts already imply the reality of something. As DESCARTES (1637) said, *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). This proves my reality. But the reality of external things remains to be proven. After all, it could very well be like a poem says: “*All that we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream*” (POE, 1850).

1.2. The existence of the external world

People generally believe an external world exists. They perceive it (MOORE, 1939). But how can we be sure that the world exists outside our minds? The perception is not the way, because perceptions exist only in the mind (RUSSEL, 1964). They could be provoked by artificial stimulus or could be just a dream. This is one of Skeptical questions.

Before trying to answer, it is worth noting that the reality of the world does not depend on our knowledge of it and neither on its proof.

Some answers: (1) According to HEIDEGGER (1927), it is a false question, since it presupposes the possibility of a “being without world”. There is no subject distinct from the external world of things. *Dasein* is essentially Being-in-the-world. (2) In relation to RUSSELL’s view about perception (which he abandoned in future works), I could say that it does not matter if perception is caused by the effects of the physical world on our sense organs or if it is caused by effects of the sense organs over the mind. In each case there is something external which brings new data to the mind. (3) The skeptics would not accept the empiric proof, but they should do, since the very terms of the question (external/internal/existence) are of empirical basis, which means that if they do not accept the empirical data they do not have a question. To sum up: when MOORE rose his hand in 1939 (WINCH, 1958), it sufficed as a proof of the existence of the external world; (4) The idea of a dream from which we can never wake up is not the idea of a dream, yet the idea of the reality, for if there is no chance of a right perception (i.e. to wake up), it is nonsense to think our perceptions are all false (NAGEL, 1987).

Maybe we can not prove the existence of the external world, but it is the only world we have where we continue all our activity (including the discussing of such a question). In the following parts of this paper, as in the everyday life, I take it for granted.

1.3. The relative existence of ethical duties

A duty is something that someone *really* ought to do (universability). My point here is: there is no such a thing. What we *really ought to do* is the ethical question, not to be confused, for example, with technical, legal, religious, economical or logical duties. When people say “you ought to avoid that street”, it is implicit “in order to keep safe”. This is not an ethical duty. It is a technical duty. It only describes means to an end (GADAMER, 1960). If we are committed to a given end, for example, the economic growth of our country, the facts can be the basis for what we ought to do. However, in this case we are not dealing with ethical but technical duties.

When people say “according to the catholic rules, a monk ought to avoid women” it is not an ethical duty: it is a duty only according to the Catholic Church’s rules. But if you thought a monk *really* ought to avoid women, without any regard to an end and without any submission to the will of others, then you would be in front an ethical duty. This does not exist. Ethical duties have only a relative way of existence: they only exist in relation to the system of norms which is their basis.

It is of no use to say that the question should not be about existence, but about validity. Existence and validity are faces of the same coin: a duty *exists* when a rule is *valid*. A rule is valid when it is founded on a higher rule. This higher rule has to be founded on other higher yet, and so on. This leads to the so called “Münchhausen trilemma”. To ALBERT (2000) an absolute foundation of human knowledge is not possible, because it would always rely on (a) a circle, (b) an infinite regress, or (c) a dogmatic statement. I think the Trilemma applies perfectly to the ethical duties. Since there is no absolute (or founded) system of norms, absolute duties do not exist.

For example: a father tells his son to wash his hands each half an hour. The father has created a rule. Is this rule valid? Does a duty to wash the hands exist? Maybe according to the Ten Commandments yes, because they say: “*Honor your father and mother*”. That is what I call “a relative existence”, because we can go on asking for the validity of the Ten Commandments, and so on, but in a given moment we will find nothing.

Thus, a duty is nothing more then the object of someone’s will. What is called duty cannot be deduced by reason, without regarding someone’s will. Hence, anything like duty cannot finally exist. A duty is related to the will the

same way a character is related to a story. There is no prescription in the world but the outcome of some intention. MACKIE (1991) says that objective values are not “*part of the fabric of the universe.*” This conception about ethical values will have consequences when we talk about knowledge, language, truth and foundation. What does not exist can not be known. If we talk about what does not exist, our claims can not be truth. If we try to ultimately justify a claim about what does not exist, we will fail.

If we are committed to a given end, for example, the economic growth of our country, the facts can be the basis for what we ought to do. However, in this case we are not dealing with ethical but technical duties.

1.4. The reality of the law

The law is one of the possible relative bases for a duty. In the meaning of *set of norms*, the law is a human institution (CASTORIADIS, 1975). Even being human, it is something real (not only the nature and the material things are real). Besides being created, the law can be *sanctioned* (CASTORIADIS, 1975; KELSEN, 1960) and the sanction is real: it corresponds to a predisposition to enforce the law. Even so, the duty based on the law has only a relative existence: an existence *in relation* to the law. The legal duties are a special case of ethical duties and his sanction generates a special case of technical duties (I ought to do X in order to avoid the sanction Y).

Being a special case of ethics, a special case of what we ought to do, the law is established by acts of a human will (KELSEN, 1960). Of course there are differences depending on whose will we are talking about (e.g. a gang of thieves, KELSEN, 1960), but this is not our concern now.

1.5. Do numbers exist?

Only a Platonist would accept the existence of logical entities such as numbers. A mathematical operation is not a claim about existence. It is just a statement within an abstract system, used to describe the world. Thus, the question of the existence of numbers is of no cognitive significance (CARNAP, 1966). Numbers are abstract entities, which refers to properties of things without being things. I say “there are two books on the table” because the language use numbers to talk about objects. This example-sentence is truth-apt. Just the same, we can make sentences talking about abstract things, i.e., about entities without existence in the real world. These are logical sentences, whose truth can be asserted by the use of reason solely, without empirical inquires. Numbers are names (or concepts) given to quantities and not to things.

1.6. Do future events exist?

Future events do not exist, yet.

1.7. The reality of a text

A text consists in his material body, I mean, in the letters placed on a sheet. A text and the intention of its author are different objects. The first can be a clue to find the second. What is, then, the interpretation of a text? It is not to *give* meaning to a text (against GUASTINI, 2005). The meaning, in the case of a text, depends on the language. And the language depends on a group. However, a language and a group are things that do not depend on the text (the object). This means, in particular, that they are external to the text.

A possible objection: if the text did not possess any meaning it would lose all its specificity. It would not be a text, as we understand the word. The aptness to provoke a given meaning in the reader's mind is exactly what we call "to have meaning". The text is a vehicle for meaning. So, the mode of being of a text is his meaning.

Defense: a text is like the cultural objects in general: *people* give them meaning. The meaning is in the group which shares the language used in the text. The object does not change because the reader's view changes (DERISI, 1976). When the text seems to be changed, it is because the reader added his own conceptions to it.

Why the reality of a text is not basically equal to the author's intention? An author writes more than he knows and more than he is: he reflects his entire cultural luggage, of which he is in general not aware (GADAMER, 1960). The intention of the author takes part of the real world; it is a real object, as the text is. But the author's intention should not be confused with the meaning of a text. The first occurred in the author's mind before the writing, the second is what have resulted from all the culture embodied in the author and his capacity for writing in a given moment. The text can easily go further or fail to meet the author's intention; nevertheless it is a good clue to discover it. Consider the example of an author who is not good in writing. His intention is to say "A", but his text shows no difference from what is usually applied to say "B". If we know the author's intention, we can, in some circumstances, reject the message of the text and keep what we know about the author's intention. What we have in this case is one object which supplants the other, and not one single object.

It is worth noting that, although the language results of the use people (including the reader) do from signs, it is a cultural outcome, not a personal one (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953).

These premises on *reality* lead to some conclusions with respect to *knowledge*, *language*, *truth* and *foundation*. They are developed in the next sections.

2. KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is true belief. “*What is the difference between knowledge and opinion? The man who has knowledge has knowledge of something, that is to say, of something that exists (...). But opinion can be mistaken*” (RUSSEL, 1946, explaining PLATO’s thought). According to the standard analysis, knowledge can only exist when three components are present: justification, truth, and belief (MOSE, 1995). I think that truth and belief are enough to the concept of knowledge. I mean, even when people fail to justify what they believe to be true, it will be knowledge if it is actually true. Here I agree with NOZICK (1981).

2.1. The possibility of knowledge

If the real world exists, are human beings able to know something about it? Does something like *knowledge* exist? Is it true that we can never know, only conjecture? (POPPER, 1959). In my opinion, knowledge is possible. I think knowledge not only exists but also can be improved, developed, compared and accumulated. The limitations of the senses and their variations among the people do not indicate the impossibility of knowledge. Everyone who is fallible (and our senses are fallible) can be right sometimes. In every point one is right, s/he has knowledge. This shows the possibility of knowledge. The Skeptics would say, “how do you know when someone is right or wrong, since your senses are fallible?” I think this question do not concern the *existence* of knowledge, but only of its *foundation*. Even what is not justified can be real knowledge. The foundation can be required when someone says something as being true. Even then it is a posterior event, detached from the statement. In other words, people can be right or wrong in their assumptions about the reality, even if nobody comes to know the object in question.

I think the knowledge works this way: people are in the world and are, in some grade, sensible to it. Not all the things can be known. There are many that are difficult or even impossible to know. Think, for example, in the planets that probably exist out of the reach of all our scientific apparatus. The limits of human

perception and reason compared to the whole universe make the knowledge always incomplete. To the Skeptics, the things show themselves in different ways to different sensibilities (BLACKBURN, 2006). However, the fact of the incompleteness of knowledge does not demonstrate its impossibility, quite on the contrary: to something be incomplete it has to exist first. On the other hand, the variability of sense among human beings shows that something is sensed and therefore a relation between the reality and the knowing beings is happening. The individual disagreement about the reality does not indicate absence of knowledge: even if all the living beings believed in the existence of *unicorns* and *elephants* it would not change the fact that they have known part (and no more than part) of the reality.

I know that the Skeptics' claim is not concerning everyday life, but I think everyday life can be a clue to the possibility of knowledge. Consider the examples (1) of a map and (2) of a blind person. Even being incomplete in comparison to the surface described, a road-map corresponds to part of it and is useful for driving. The blind man counts only on some senses and they are enough to know something about the street he aims to cross. Both cases represent genuine knowledge rather than mere belief.

Consider what Bertrand Russell says: "*We all start from 'naïve realism', i.e., the doctrine that things are what they seem. We think that grass is green, that stones are hard, and that snow is cold. But physics assures us that the greenness of the grass, the hardness of stones, and the coldness of snow are not the greenness, hardness, and coldness that we know in our own experience, but something very different. The observer, when he seems to himself to be observing a stone, is really, if physics is to be believed, observing the effects of the stone upon himself*" (RUSSEL, 1950). The difference between naïve realism and physics is not that the first is wrong and the second is right. I glass is a glass before and after we know it is constituted by invisible atoms. The former knowledge was not wrong, it was incomplete.

Besides that, the advances in physics and the development of tools of great precision are points for the possibility of knowledge, not against it. They compensate the imperfection of human senses, as other techniques did in the past. Our opinions usually are submitted to argumentation with other people and we are able to see where we have made mistakes. Our critical attitude in relation to information, which implies the possibility of having knowledge more complete than before (PIERCE, 1877), makes the fallibility of perception a secondary and reduced problem.

After all, the strongest objection to the possibility of genuine knowledge is the boring "that one is not dreaming is not something one can know". With respect to this, see 1.2.

2.2. The knowledge in ethics

In the section “Reality”, I claimed, about the reality of ethical duties, that they “have only a relative way of existence: they only exist in relation to the system of norms which is their basis.” Hence, to know a real duty is impossible. All that we can know are the norms that people impose dogmatically over the others. As we have seen, a duty does not exist in an absolute way. We only can look for it in its relative sources, which are the people’s will or mere belief. It does not mean that we can not have moral preferences or choose moral values, derived from what we consider to be a good project for the world: it is just because moral preferences are not absolutely founded that we are free to do our choices. The law is an example of this: it is a set of institutionalized options.

2.3. The knowledge of Law

The law (in one of its meanings) is one of the sets of norms in relation to which some duties can exist. The law, as the ethical duties in general, comes from the will and mere belief of people. That is where it comes from. But the result is an institution. It is something institutionalized (CASTORIADIS, 1975). In order to know the law, we have to look for it in the institutions. Being an institution, the law is something real, therefore it can be known. However, who wants to know the law is going to face difficulties concerning its identification, in other words, when a given rule is or is not law (HART, 1961).

2.4. The knowledge of the future

What kind of knowledge we can have about the future? Are future events a possibility or a reality? The question has to do with determinism.

If I accepted determinism, the problem would be abridged to the human *lack of knowledge*: in order to know the future with absolute certainty it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of all the things of the universe at the present. Laplace’s Demon, knowing completely the things of present and his laws, would be able to know exactly what is going to happen in the future (LAPLACE, 1816). So, as very probably none knows the universe this way, there is at least a lack of knowledge to talk about the future with absolute certainty.

The example of Russell’s chicken illustrates this very well: “... *all these rather crude expectations of uniformity are liable to be misleading. The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken.*” (RUSSEL, 1912) The chicken’s problem was its lack of knowledge of the reality outside the poultry yard.

If the deterministic theory is wrong, not even a complete knowing of the universe in the present suffices to know about future events.

What to say about the predictions of science? When scientists predict something, are they saying false or unjustified statements? Maybe not, for we have to consider implicit some grade of uncertainty in every prediction. So, if I say that is very probable that the spaceship will reach the moon, the statement will be about the *probability*, and not (immediately) about the future. Probability is an inference we do from the reality. It is a logical assumption, the reason operating on the data. The statement, in this case, can be false due to a lack of knowledge or to a faulty reasoning. The probability, as other mathematical entities, does not exist in the reality, but only in the logical world.

To sum up, with or without determinism “*we cannot anticipate today that which we shall only know tomorrow*” (POPPER, 1959). In each case the future does not exist, yet. But with determinism we cannot predict the future because of a lack of knowledge and without determinism because the future can be anything.

2.5. The knowledge of texts

To know a text is not to give it a meaning. Note the difference in the following example: (1) people gave meaning to the knife in the past, and (2) you want to know which meaning was that. You do not want to *give* the meaning: you want to *discover* it. Who wants to know the object examines just the object. And who wants to know the meaning of the object has to investigate not in the very object, but where the meaning is/was, that is, in people’s mind. When a historian investigates the uses of the knife in the Middle Ages, is the knife his object? Would not be more appropriate to say the object is “the society of the Middle Ages”? The same way the uses of a knife are to be found in a human group, the meaning of a text is to be found in the uses of language by a human group (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953; AUSTIN, 1962).

We can look for the author’s intention as well, but then the *intention* will be our object, and not the text itself. On the way of being of texts, see 1.7 above.

This explains why the meaning of a text can change through the time while the text (as an object of knowledge) remains the same.

3. LANGUAGE

Knowledge, opinion, will etc. can be transmitted by means of communication. The process of communication uses a language. A language is a

system of signs (not only letters or words, but mainly sentences) used to communicate meaning.

When one wants to transmit what he knows, he tells it. Knowledge can be communicated. Rarely someone will be able to communicate exactly all that he knows on a particular topic. And even if he manages to do so, the receiver can interpret the message with distortions in relation to the intention of the teller.

If this is right, knowledge is barely *communicated* in a language and does not depend itself on a language. I mean that even if you do not have a language you can still know a lot of things about the reality. For example: the fact that a tree is rising on my yard comes to my knowledge through my perception and I need not even a minimum of language to know that. How the reality is and how it is immediately known are things that do not depend on language.

On the other hand, language is something real and an interesting object of knowledge. Much about the society can be understood by means of its linguistic usages (WINCH, 1958).

4. TRUTH

According to the *correspondence theory*, truth is the correspondence of a statement to the reality (RUSSELL, 1912; MOORE, 1910). To quote RUSSELL again, “*a belief is true when there is a corresponding fact, and is false when there is no corresponding fact*” (1912). Up to this point, we have already seen that (1) the things exist, (2) they can be known, (3) the knowledge can be communicated in a linguistic form (a statement), and (4) a statement can be compared to the reality in order to check if it is true or not. I am not going to consider the other theories of truth (*e.g.* HABERMAS, 1971) because my target is not the meaning of the word “truth” but the correspondence of statements to facts.

A statement does not have to be justified to be true. Maybe in many situations the absence of justification leaves us without knowing if the statement is true or false. Nevertheless, it does not mean it *is* false. True and false are predicates of a statement, and therefore they would not exist if there were no minds. But truth and falsity do not depend on the person who expresses the statement but on the actual existence of the reality asserted (RUSSEL, 1966). For instance: consider a world without minds but with stones: the stones exist in this world, but the fact of their existence is neither true nor false, because true and false are predicates of statements (or beliefs, assertions, etc.) and there is no statement in this imaginary world.

A statement liable to the examination of its correspondence to the reality is called *truth-apt* (AYER, 1935).

4.1. The truth in ethical questions

Ethical statements are not *truth-apt*, or better, they are truth-apt, but are always false (MACKIE, 1991). About an ethical statement like “lying is wrong”, we can sure say it is false, because nothing is wrong *in the reality*. According to SANTAYANA (1913), “*to speak of the truth of an ultimate good would be a false collocation of terms; an ultimate good is chosen, found or aimed at; it is not opined.*” It can, however, be true in a weaker connotation: when we say that something is wrong only *according to a given rule, a pattern, or a definite audience* (AUSTIN, 1962), and the normative question passes then to be about the duty to obey the rule. In this weak meaning we can sure say that “according our family tradition, lying is wrong”, “according to the Bible, lying is wrong”, “according to Utilitarianism, lying is wrong”, etc. On the *reality* of ethical duties, see 1.3 above.

4.2. The truth in legal adjudication

DWORKIN claims that “*in most hard cases there are right answers to be hunted by reason and imagination*” (1986). I see it in a slightly different way.

Law establishes norms which differ from those of morals because they take part of an institution, named law. But the ultimate decision about what one should do in a concrete situation is always an ethical answer, because this is ethics: what finally one ought to do (note that in the majority of cases the ethical duty will indicate the respect for the law as the right answer, but in extreme cases it can be different). As we have already seen, there is no absolute ethical duty. What is to say, there is no such a thing as a right answer in ethics. A relative right answer, however, sometimes is possible. For instance: right answer in relation to the options of a community, in relation to a religious doctrine, in relation to the law, etc. Even in relation to “what one considers the most desirable world for all the human beings and animas” it is possible to find a right answer for the question “what I ought to do?”

So, as a right answer in law requires only an internal correspondence, it is something possible. A problem arises when the law does not have the answer (what is very frequent) and the judge has to look for it in ethics. Factors that can probably make the law voiceless: gaps, clashes, ambiguities, indeterminacy about the sources, etc. Another problem arises when the judge feel obliged (according to its moral convictions) to not apply the legal rule. In this cases, that is, when the law does not give the answer or when its answer is not accepted for stronger reasons, that what was said in the previous paragraph is applicable.

4.3. The truth in abstract questions

Abstract statements, for example, a statement of logic or mathematics, can be true or false, even do not being part of the real world. The logical entities are truth-apt, because, in its case, we judge the correct application of logical rules.

4.4. The right interpretation of a text

As we have already seen, when we investigate the meaning of a text there are different possible objects: the author's intention and the use of language in one or several *forms of life* (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953). For instance: we can look for the interpretation of the Bible in the use of language among the first Christian apostles (a form of life) or we can look for it in the use of language among the Vatican clergy (another form of life). Theoretically, it is possible to find a right interpretation for a text in each of the objects. But the right interpretation is not subjective, because language is not subjective. The interpretation is a cultural outcome. On the other hand, one single interpretation exceptionally will coincide with author's intention and the uses of language of several forms of life.

5. FOUNDATION

To found is to prove the truth of a statement. Every statement contains a claim of acceptation (TOULMIN, 1958). If this claim is refused, it is necessary to found the statement, or at least justify it. Justification consists in offering reasonable arguments for a given statement. But what cannot be founded or justified can nevertheless be true. The question about being right when considering an statement as being true is different from the question of being able or not to prove that the statement is true (DWORKIN, 1986).

5.1. On the possibility of justification

Since justification only requires good reasons, there is little doubt about the possibility of justification, even in ethical questions. Justification does not prove that a statement is true (against TOULMIN, 1958). It only shows it is reasonable.

5.2 On the possibility of ultimate foundation

POPPER (1953) follows HUME (1748) in his critic to the induction principle. According to HUME we can know nothing regarding the reality without experience but experience does not grant the universality of a hypothesis or

theory. POPPER sees in the induction principle an effort to get a knowledge founded on ultimate certainties. POPPER claims that we cannot found any certainty on the induction principle. And so, there is no ultimate certainty and therefore there would be a lack of foundation to all our knowledge. To ALBERT (2000), an absolute justification of human knowledge is not possible, because it would always rely on (a) a circle, (b) an infinite regress, or (c) a dogmatic statement - the so named “Münchhausen trilemma”.

I agree with them only in part. If something real exists (1.1 and 1.2 above) and if something can be known (2.1), it follows that the proof of the truth of a statement is possible: its foundation is in the very reality immediately known. As we have seen, knowledge can be expressed through the speech (although sometimes defectively). When the statement refers only to the known part of the reality, i.e., when it is explicitly contextual and partial, when it does not refer to a complete truth (that would have to be a truth about everything), it is founded by the empirical proof of the facts asserted. For example, if one says her husband is dead, a complete justification comes from acquiring the same knowledge, which can be provided by an empirical examination on the old skeleton.

Nevertheless, I agree with HUME, POPPER and ALBERT in what refers to future events (induction principle) and ethical questions. I think statements of this kind cannot be ultimately founded. It does not mean they cannot be justified (see 5.1). The induction principle is not completely reliable because the future does not exist yet and even if the world worked in a deterministic way (what we do not know) the induction would be fallible due to our lack of an absolute knowledge of everything, what is reserved to the Laplace’s Demon (2.4). The lack of foundation does not point out a lack of justification in the scientific method: its rationality is not in the certainty of the conclusions but on its self-corrective character, i.e., science can detect and correct its own mistakes (PIERCE, 1877), making the human knowledge more and more ample.

The same can be said about ethics. Ethical statements cannot be ultimately founded because there are no objectively prescriptive facts (MACKIE, 1991). Due to the nonexistence of a Platonic world where absolute moral norms are written, they lack reality and consequently they lack foundation. It does not mean it is irrational to follow ethical principles or the law: due to an optional framework, everyone can be committed to construct the world his reason considers the best. It would be irrational if he did not do that. But this is not the same as to say that people *ought* to want the best of the worlds.

APEL (1976) and HÖSLE (1990) claim that an ultimate foundation of all our knowledge is possible, and present as the absolute fundament the *reasonable argumentation*. According to them, the certainty of the requirement of reasonable argumentation cannot be denied without self-contradiction in the pragmatic level:

in order to *deny it* one has to *use it*. But this says nothing about the reality. It is just “*human, all too human*” (NIETZSCHE, 1878).

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